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ABSTRACT

The business communications teacher helps the student learn to write the proposal that wins a promotion or the sales letter that wins new customers. Students poised to enter the business world need language theories as much as students studying literature, for the corporate language culture is as unpredictable and ambiguous as any literary text. Using deconstruction is practical, since it is an activity, not just a theory of how language works. Jacques Derrida begins with the difference between the written and the spoken word. Deconstruction seeks systematically to explore the lag between what is meant and what is said. Students must learn how to interrogate language and to see that as far as language goes, the teacher does not have all the answers either. In an assignment where the teacher has limited control, the class is divided into self-selected groups of four or five and turned into a "company." The groups are then provided with scenarios lacking in details--they must come up with a plan to make their division profitable. Communication must take place, and it must be in writing. The process is informed by perceptions associated with Derrida: that language is inherently ambiguous, that meaning is created by writer and reader, and that any text says what the writer intended to say and what the writer never intended to say. Variations on this assignment can make it more traditional, and eventually the again logocentric teacher assigns a grade. (NKA)

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Derrida Meets IBM: Using Deconstruction

To Teach Business Communication Students

Walker Percy(1977) once lamented that if anyone solved the mystery of language, no one would be interested because the world is divided into two types of language users: the theorist of language and the layman: "To the layman, language is a transparent, humdrum affair. Where is the mystery? " (qtd.in Forkner and Samway, p. 717). But the specialists, who are aware of mystery, practice "such esoteric and abstruse disciplines as transformational generative grammar, formal semantics, semiotics, and . . . by and large have their heads up their asses and can't even be understood by fellow specialists"(qtd. in Forkner and Samway, p. 717).

In some ways the business communications teacher stands just where Percy does: between the specialists and the layman. Since most business communications courses are taught by professors with English backgrounds, they are very much aware of the mystery of language and the many theorists who write about it. Yet they face an audience of students who perceive language to be as transparent as a window pane if they could just get it right. Indeed to students, helping them to get it right is the teacher's job. He or she is to help them learn to write the proposal that wins a promotion, the sales letter that wins new customers, the memo that rockets the sales staff to new levels of productivity. Such students do not want to be told that we see through a glass darkly or that language is a system with no intrinsic relationship to reality, or

God forbid, that there is slippage between the signifier and the signified. Professors who embark upon such theoretical heresies will quickly find themselves, to use Percy's language, with "their heads up their asses."

Still, students poised to go out into the business world need these theories desperately, for the corporate language culture in which they find themselves will be as unpredictable and as thickly sown with ambiguity as any literary text. The average one-page memo can require of them adroit manipulation of language and audience and on occasion deliver to them the disastrous audience response they never in their wildest dreams expected. So how does the professor give them theory without losing their attention and give it to them so that they will remember it? Oddly enough, the most esoteric branch of literary criticism and theory might help here: Deconstruction.

Since its inception in the sixties, Deconstruction has been viewed as the most radical of literary theories. What critics often ignore is its practicality. Unlike many other theories, Deconstruction is an activity, not just a theory of how language works. What is more, it is an activity we all can participate in. Still, before I can suggest a teaching strategy based upon Deconstruction, I must provide a basic understanding of the term. This is particularly important because though Deconstruction is normally associated with Jacques Derrida, many other theorists and critics, such as Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, have associated themselves with the term. So the body of ideas that go along with the concept is large indeed. What is more, as business communications instructors, we need only concern ourselves with a basic understanding of the concept, a kind of foundation for instructing our students in

what Percy calls "the mystery of language." A complete understanding of the term is beyond the scope of this essay.

According to Barbara Johnson (1981) in her introduction to Derrida's *Dissemination*, Derrida provides a critique of the entire basis of Western Metaphysics. His critique begins with the difference between the written word and the spoken word. Western culture privileges the spoken word, assuming that the living presence of the speaker brings to his or her words a guarantee of truth. The man or woman standing before me knows what he or she means to say and says it. The written word is more problematic. It is a representation of speech, and meaning ceases to be a living presence, leaving the text to be corrupted by the distance between writer and reader: thus the privileging of speech in our culture. Derrida does not just suggest that speech should not be privileged over writing. He insists that the whole notion that we say what we mean and mean what we say is an illusion which grows out of one of the basic assumptions of our culture: "logocentrism." We assume a center, a constant meaning, or as Johnson says a *"Logos,"* the Greek term "meaning speech, logic, reason, the word of God" (ix). In short, we misunderstand the basic way in which language works.

Derrida's critique is based upon Saussure's understanding of the way words mean. To Saussure, there is no intrinsic relationship between word and meaning. All language is a system of signs that are arbitrarily connected to objects, feelings, meanings. Thus, each word has two parts: the sound or *signifier* (table, for example) and the meaning or *signified* (the mental image of tableness). Speakers or writers hope to create images in the listener's or reader's mind that are identical to those in their own: they want their words to convey meaning. But the nature of language to some degree works against the whole process of meaning because of the slippery

nature of words. The relationship of signifier and signified is totally arbitrary, so my idea of tableness and my listener's may be miles apart. To use language is to struggle against the difference between what I mean by table and what my listener thinks I mean by table. (I have consciously chosen a concrete word. The situation becomes more complicated with an abstract word like power, harmony, justice, or freedom).

Thus, we come to what Johnson calls one of Derrida's most important terms: *differance* derived from the French verb *differer* which means "to differ" and "to defer." *Differance* is the lag in meaning or deference of meaning that inhabits the core of our language and according to Derrida our whole culture. Where we assume presence, immediacy, and immanence, there is actually representation, distance, and differance. Deconstruction seeks systematically to explore this lag between what we mean and what we say. As Derrida (1981) says, "The reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses" (qtd in Johnson, p. xv). Thus, the reader who would deconstruct a text must look at what the writer intended to say and what the writer never intended to say but said anyway. Deconstruction is the act of illuminating these shadows in the text, forcing them out into the open.

The philosophical ramifications of Derrida's approach to language are enormous and many faceted, but these need not concern us in the business communications classroom. Rather, we should be concerned with what Deconstruction teaches us: that the writer may not be in complete control of meaning, that absolute truth is not the product of any given reading, and that the reader may be just as important as the writer in puzzling out meanings from a text or a memo or a business letter. But how do we bring these perceptions to life without subjecting students to

the rigors of the theory itself or even the rigors of the kind of haphazard summary I just provided? In my estimation this process has two steps: first we must force students to interrogate language, and second we can allow them to see that as far as language goes, the teacher does not have all of the answers either. Being a symbol-using creature, he or she is as subject to the ambiguities of language as anyone else. This second part of the process creates the possibility of the classroom becoming more than a lecture hall where knowledge is imparted to the unenlightened. Learning can become a shared experience.

Many of the primary proponents of Deconstruction see the text as something much broader than a literary text. Indeed, J. Hillis Miller (1983) defines the goal of Deconstruction as "an interrogation of the logos, the ground . . . at the base of all word play." (qtd in LaGranduer, p.1). Thus, we might begin the process of forcing students to interrogate language by looking at some of the ambiguity evident in the mundane language of the road sign. Terry Egleton (1983) begins his book on literary theory by calling attention to the ambiguity of the following escalator sign: "Dogs must be carried on the escalator" (p.6). In similar fashion, Steven Lynn (1994) begins his discussion of Deconstruction in *Text and Contexts* by deconstructing this elevator sign: "Seeing Eye Dogs Only." In both cases deconstructing the signs leaves us with some interesting results. Each sign attempts to privilege one sort of rider. In the case of the first sign, the rider without a dog is privileged: presumably, people who have dogs are to carry them so that they will not bother the rider without an animal. Yet in reality the message can be taken in quite a different way, for the sign quite literally says that escalator riders need dogs to ride. In this case it quite clearly privileges the rider with a dog, for dogless riders cannot climb on the escalator. We have now illuminated the shadow; this is what the writer never intended, but it is

right there, a part of the text. The second sign works in quite the same way as Steven Lynn points out. It sets out to privilege the blind rider, allowing him or her to bring aboard a seeing eye dog. But looked at from another angle it suggests that only the dog can ride, and since it is a written sign it clearly is something the blind rider cannot read. Thus, he or she must enter the elevator not knowing whether the dog is allowed or not.

Now I know that I am making mountains of molehills or symbols out of sign posts, that most riders are going to be able to distinguish what each sign means without my help and that most would never embark on these kinds of esoteric musings. Still, if I may play Derrida's advocate a moment longer, in both of these cases words are slippery, meanings must be constructed by the experienced train rider, and in the case of the blind reader the sign system fails altogether. These signs are not graffiti scrawled on the subway wall; probably they were reasoned out by an experienced sign maker, perhaps even by a committee of experienced signmakers. And yet they expose to each of us the unfixed center of meaning that Derrida claims is an inescapable part of all language, just the point that every writing teacher needs to inculcate into his students.

Deconstructing road signs is an effective way of introducing business writing students to some of the perceptions and insights associated with Deconstruction. Most students find word play to be quite entertaining and funny. They will listen with eager fascination to some of the absurd possibilities in the signs listed above. Furthermore, being accustomed to playing with words since their infancy, they will eagerly go out and find words to play with. I suggest an assignment where every student must find an ambiguous sign or message, bring it to class and deconstruct it. Such signs are not hard to find. Without effort, I noticed the following sign at

the school my older son attends: "Student Parking Parent Drop off and Pickup." Who gets dropped off or picked up? The sign suggests the parent does. How many times have drivers been stuck on the freeway behind a line of cars facing an unpunctuated sign reading "Slow Men Working"? Or has anyone ever contemplated the rich possibilities of the road sign in the mountains, " Rocks Falling"? Such an assignment will demonstrate concretely Derrida's notion that ambiguity or difference is inherent in the very structure of language.

Still in many respects this assignment has its limits, for it replicates the very logocentric structure that Derrida questions. Though the students interrogate language, they do so at the insistence of the professor who is at the very center of the business communication classroom. The teacher is the *Logos*, the center of meaning in the classroom. He or she imparts knowledge to the unenlightened, insists that language is ambiguous and that the student go out and explore that ambiguity, dutifully bringing it back to the classroom. Kevin LeGrandeur (1991) has observed that "any attempt to incorporate deconstruction into the classroom is likely to be just another version of traditional procedure unless it takes into account the broader problems of authority inherent in the student-teacher relationship" (p. [1]). As long as the teacher is above the fray, the tangle of language, then students will never learn that to use language is to struggle against words. So after introducing students to Deconstruction by the road sign exercise, the teacher must seek an exercise that removes him or her from the center of the classroom experience.

Most business communication assignments I have used in the past do nothing to remove the teacher from the center of the classroom. Most of these assignments are based upon prefabricated situations in which the students must play their part. For example, students are

asked to pretend they are directors of human resources. Their job is to write a memo to the office staff explaining a new health care benefit or a new cost associated with life insurance. The student complies, following the rules the text has explained concerning good or bad news messages. The teacher grades the assignment, noting whether the student has actually internalized and emulated all of the rules the textbook proposes. Though these sorts of assignments are certainly essential in teaching students some of the basic components of good business communication, they do nothing to introduce students to the complexities of language that have been the center of this essay.

I suggest an assignment over which the teacher has limited control. I divide my class into groups of four of five. I allow the students to select their own group members because I am interested in establishing strong group identities. Then early in the semester I turn them all into a company. Though there are many ways in which this procedure might work, I often will make one group the CEO, another group the manager of day-to-day operation and another group the director of human resources. I might add to this a group that is to function as a disgruntled employee or as a union representative. I then provide them with a scenario that is intended to be lacking in detail. For example, they all work for a division of a large corporation that has consistently lost money. The corporation has just been the victim of a large corporate takeover. The new CEO is going to visit their office within a month, so that they must present a plan for making their division profitable. If their plan is not convincing, their division will be sold to the highest bidder. Each group must represent the interests of its constituents, but it must also work within the context of the company as whole. I encourage each group to complicate the situation so that the class may actually begin to create the issues. The President must set communication

into motion by sending a directive to various staff members. This directive may establish a new office policy, demand reports for all of the other groups, or insist upon new standards of office behavior, whatever the group decides. The only rule in operation here is that communication must take place, and it must be put in writing.

Modern technology adds a twist to this assignment by allowing students to communicate outside of class through e-mail and fax machines. This sort of communication gives the students even more control over the process because the teacher need not know until class time what sorts of complications have been introduced into the original scenario. During classroom periods set aside for company meetings the teacher must struggle to keep out of the center of the classroom, allowing the students to evaluate each other's communication from the various standpoints within the company. Ideally, group identification takes over, and students begin on their own to tear apart each other's work, illuminating what Derrida calls the shadows in the text. Such a classroom situation takes us far beyond any strict adherence to the tenets of Deconstruction, for groups may tear each other's writing apart in any way they wish. They are not limited to a deconstructive analysis. Still, the whole process is informed by the perceptions I have associated with Derrida: that language is inherently ambiguous, that meaning is created by writer and reader, and that any text says what the writer intended to say as well as what the writer never intended to say. And if the teacher manages to stay out of the center, students are learning about that most important component of any business communicator's world: the audience.

Teachers who are particularly bold may take this assignment one step further and become a company officer themselves, taking an active role in the week-to-week communication. Two problems are inherent in this approach. First, it tends to replicate the traditional classroom

where the teacher is the center of knowing: students are afraid to assail the teacher's work or look to the teacher to provide the only truly knowledgeable feedback. (This has never been a problem in my classes; my students attack my writing with cheerful zeal.) Second, if the class overcomes this barrier, there is the teacher's ego. Teachers who allow students to deconstruct their writing will often have to admit to being just another user of language, one who sometimes says the ambiguous or the unclear or what was never intended. In short, the teacher truly ceases to be the center.

There are many variations on this assignment that can make it more traditional. Teachers may use the groups as evaluation teams. I sometimes give my class an unexpected assignment. I put them into one of those classic prefabricated positions: they must write a letter explaining a product recall or a memo explaining a reduction in pay. Each group must produce one memo or letter and present it to the class. The other groups in class then become the evaluators, critiquing either orally or in writing what the other groups have done. Again, part of the trick here is for the teacher to stay out of the center, allowing the critique to become a classroom exercise and not just one where the teacher imparts knowledge to the unknowing.

I guess we all agree that there must come a time when the teacher comes back to the center of the classroom and in logocentric fashion assigns a grade. That is simply the way our educational system works. Still, students need to experience the ambiguity of language as participants in the process rather than as blind men and women seeking to know. Deconstruction helps them to be a part of this experience. Hopefully, it leaves them somewhere between the theorist with "his head up his ass" (if I may again borrow Percy's phrasing) and the layman who thinks of words as one more humdrum affair.

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